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ABSTRACT

In the face of declining enrollments, the small rural community college can no longer afford not to include a full-time public information officer on the administrative staff. An investment in a public information office, with an expert officer supported by a full- or part-time secretary, can build a valuable cadre of college advocates in the political, donor, and student arenas. While there is merit to paid advertising, especially when a consortium of colleges shares media costs, the public information can also effectively serve the college by: (1) securing publicity in news releases, media public service announcements, church newsletters, and other communication channels; (2) professionalizing college publications; (3) maintaining contacts with staff in various college departments through, for example, an internal newsletter; (4) developing a college marketing program that includes community surveys and a reevaluation of the college mission in light of survey findings; and (5) performing a variety of other functions such as attending board meetings and serving as historian for the college. The success of the public information function will depend on presidential support and upon the information officer's qualifications. The officer should report directly to the president, sit on the president's cabinet, and have a bachelor's degree and background in non-profit public relations. He/she should, in short, be a super-human: for the sake of the college, no less should be expected. (JP)

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HOW DO YOU SPELL SURVIVAL?

P-U-B-L-I-C I-N-F-O-R-M-A-T-I-O-N

By

John M. Eaton
and
Kathleen E. Guy

"A college our size doesn't need a public information person."

"Our president is great with people. He should do the public relations work, it's part of his job."

"We can't afford a full-time public information officer, so we'll see who has some spare time to do some writing and advertising."

These typical excuses for not hiring a full-time public information officer are proferred by chief administrators and boards at many small, rural community colleges.

The truth is, we can little afford not to include a full-time public information officer on our administrative staff.

As the faculty communicates in the classroom with students, so must the public information practitioner communicate with the community. His/her efforts feed the roots of the College to ensure survival. The public information officer must define the purpose of the institution to its various publics and, in turn, be receptive to communication from those publics about needs and perceptions.

Spending money to make money is more than a cliche' in the public information sense. The percentage of our budgets allocated

to this activity will reap rich investment return. Effectively performed, public information activities build a cadre of advocates in the political, donor, and student arena for our colleges.

The economic plight that many of us as small, rural community colleges now face and the enrollment changes that will undoubtedly effect us as the 1980's progress, should remind us of the importance of constituency-building. If we ignore the valuable asset of an expert public information officer, we are guilty of neglect, denying the very lifeblood of our institutions.

What kind of resources are necessary for this vital public information function ? Aside from the salary and supplies, the public information office need not involve a cast or budget of thousands. A one-man or one-woman office of public information should be able to perform admirably. Organization and a sense of priority are necessary for the solo professional. And a full- or part-time secretary is a must.

Paid media advertising and slick publications are not necessarily the best or only way to be recognized in the community. There are many ways to communicate the college's message to the community at little or no cost. News releases and feature articles, radio and television public service announcements, a college speaker's bureau and media contact program, church and industry newletter, alumni ambassadors, and campus tours are very effective "freebies."

Still, there is merit to paid advertising. It is reliable, timely and transmits a very specific message. The public infor-

mation officer can make special arrangements to keep prices reasonable, such as contract buying, two-for-one arrangements, and even cooperative purchases with other community colleges.

At West Shore Community College and Northwestern Michigan College, we have embarked on an innovative, cooperative television advertising program. Five of the small, rural community colleges in Northern Michigan have pooled resources to produce and air $30,000 worth of television advertising. The three, thirty-second ads extoll our common virtues - small size, personal attention, quality instruction and beautiful surroundings. For just a fraction of the total cost, we all reap the benefits of the twelve-month TV advertising campaign.

The public information officer can also bring order and continuity to college publications, making them attractive, well written, legal representations of the institution.

An important aspect of public information that should never be overlooked is that which is conducted among internal publics, the faculty and staff. These people are as much our constituents as are students, donors and legislators. They must be kept informed - even before the general public. Good in-house communication via a newsletter, personal contact and an "open door" both to the public information officer's and the President's office are a must.

An excellent way to stay in touch with every division of the college is the "news beat" technique. All it takes is a personal visit or phone call to the deans, division directors and department heads on a biweekly basis. These contacts are good sources of information which can be shared internally and with the general public.

Many of us are engaged in college marketing efforts. Marketing higher education is more than a "buzz word" for the 80's. It is our future. The public information officer should be instrumental in developing and implementing a comprehensive marketing plan for the college.

For so long we have been accustomed to students beating a path to our doors. Now, that custom has begun to change drastically, and we must change with it or close our doors. The days of offering what we think students want, when we think they want it, must pass. It is time to "tune in" to our publics and listen to their needs. We must begin offering programs and services for which there is student demand, rather than creating a demand for the programs and services that we offer.

Marketing program development will likely include surveying various "markets" (returning adults, high school graduates, senior adults and businesspeople), comparing those results with the stated mission and goals of the college, considering demographic, economic, technological and other factors that will have a bearing on the institution and then developing specific goals, objectives and tasks which will make the college more responsive to its constituency.

Among the other functions to be performed by a public information officer are:

- attending Board of Trustees, alumni, and development meetings and communicating that information to the college and community,
- serving as historian for the college, maintaining a scrapbook of newspaper clippings and copies of publications and catalogs, and
- working on special projects for the President such as millage campaigns, anniversary dinners and dedications.

Essential to the success of the public information function is support from the President's office. The public information officer should report directly to the President and, in turn, provide him or her with professional assistance, just as is provided by the deans and business manager.

Because of this role, it is important that the public information person be a member of the President's cabinet, have input at high-level meetings and be a part of group decision-making.

You may wonder what the qualifications for this important public information person should be. We suggest an educational background in the liberal arts, including journalism or communications, with at least a bachelor's degree. Experience in public relations for a non-profit organization would be ideal, and a knowledge of radio, TV, or newspaper reporting may also prove helpful. What a small, rural community college does not need is

a high powered advertising agency-type who is looking for "early retirement" or to get away from the big city rat-race.

We can conclude that the public information officer must be a super-human, one who can crank out news and feature stories faster than a speeding bullet, be stronger than a locomotive in developing an institutional marketing focus and be able to leap to perfect solutions to communications problems in a single bound. For the sake of the small, rural community college, we should expect and receive nothing less.

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